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ABSTRACT

Intended for parents of blind children, the booklet presents guidelines regarding potential difficulties in blind children's language development. The first section focuses on repetitions and offers suggestions on dealing with and responding to those repetitions. Section 2 considers reasons for blind children's questions, including attention, inadequate skills for engaging in conversation, and responses to adults' questions. Parents are urged to understand the effects of new experiences on their child's questionings and reasons behind children's seemingly inappropriate questions. The third section reviews common problems with pronouns and stresses the importance of waiting until the child is ready to learn correct pronoun usage. Three activities are suggested for pronoun learning: taking turns, playing games that teach body parts, and playing house. (CL)

TALK TO ME II

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"Talk to Me: A Language Guide for Parents of Blind Children" was our first publication. It offered concrete suggestions to encourage language development. "Talk to Me II: Common Concerns" is a result of the thoughtful and enthusiastic feedback we received from many people. The comments and questions raised by parents and professionals regarding the language development of young blind children provided direction for this booklet.

We are especially grateful to the families who shared their personal experiences with us. We offer special thanks to Mr. Bob Wilson who combined his professional expertise in linguistics with his personal experiences with his young blind son. We also wish to thank Dr. Elaine S. Andersen, Dr. William C. Doust, Dr. Amanda Hall, Dr. Toni G. Marcy, Dr. Ann Peters, and Mr. Shepherd Siegel for their help.

With profound appreciation, we thank everyone involved with the Margaret Bundy Scott Trust. "Talk to Me II" is one booklet in a series made possible through this Trust. Their generosity and commitment to blind children have enabled us to make this information available throughout the world.

The Blind Childrens Center offers a program of total-family services which best meets the special needs of blind and partially sighted children (from birth through seven years of age), their parents and their brothers and sisters.

Services include: Infant Stimulation Program, Mom & Me Groups, Toddler Program, Therapeutic Preschool Program, Residential Program, Psychiatric Counseling, Multi-Handicapped Program, Educational Correspondence Program, Internship Opportunities.

In addition, the Blind Childrens Center began a Publication and Research Program in 1984. Through this program, publications will be systematically distributed to professionals and parents of visually handicapped children throughout the world. Publications will be available in English and Spanish.

The Blind Childrens Center is a non-profit organization available to visually handicapped children regardless of race, color, national or ethnic origin, sex or religion. The Blind Childrens Center is the sole philanthropic project of the Southern California Delta Gamma Alumnae.

INTRODUCTION

Language is an important means for getting acquainted and sharing experiences with any child, but for a totally blind child it is especially important. While every parent is pleased when a child says her first word, such an event takes on special significance when the child is blind.

Before sighted children begin to talk, they are able to communicate with us in a number of ways. They acknowledge our presence and express preferences with smiles. Their frowns reveal displeasure and blank stares tell us we are not understood. With just a smile or look our way, sighted children encourage us to talk to them. We talk about the people around them, describe events they are looking at, and show them how to do new tasks. Through language, we help children learn about themselves and the world.

Language is even more important for children who cannot see. Blind children use language to get to know people and the world around them. However, it may take them longer to learn their first words. With help from their families, blind children learn to talk.

Over the years, many parents have expressed three common concerns about the language of their blind children. They are:

1. REPETITIONS
2. QUESTIONS
3. PRONOUNS

These concerns occur most often for totally blind children, and this booklet will address the needs of these children in particular.

Because each child is different, it is important that families find their own ways to meet their child's needs. We cannot prescribe one set of answers, but instead describe a number of suggestions to help you find your own solutions. An idea that works with one child may fail with another. You know your child better than anyone else and can best decide how to use these suggestions. You may have already tried some of the ideas in the following pages and found them to work well. Perhaps others will be new to you.

In this booklet, we will point out some areas of concern to watch for in your child's language development. These are not meant to alarm you, but merely to serve as guidelines regarding potential difficulties. We hope to alleviate unnecessary worry and to help you decide when professional help may be needed. We also hope that you are reassured knowing that many parents with blind children have experienced the same concerns and have asked the same questions. While there is no one "right" answer to these questions, there are a number of things you can do to help your child.

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I. THERE'S AN ECHO IN THE ROOM

"Do you want a cookie?" asks mom.
"Do you want a cookie?" repeats Brian.
"Brian, if you want a cookie, say,
'I want a cookie,'" requests mom.
"Say, I want a cookie," answers Brian.

This kind of conversation may be very familiar to you. Many parents of blind children report that their children repeat language for some time as they learn to talk.

Most children repeat some of the sounds and words they hear. By repeating the speech of others, children practice the names of people, animals, and toys that are important to them.

It isn't long before most sighted children begin to creatively use the language they once imitated. For example, a little boy we know used the word *daddy* to talk about his father, as well as his uncles and other men before discovering the real meaning of the word. Through trial and error, children learn the meanings of countless words. Between the ages of two and three years, sighted children begin to combine words in creative ways to make sentences that express their own ideas and feelings.

Children differ in the degree to which they repeat the language they hear. However, most blind children do more repeating than other children. Some professionals call this repeated speech "echolalia" or "parroting." This type of language expresses itself in different ways with different children. It can take the form of television jingles, nursery rhymes, or other people's ways of talking.

Understanding Why

There are a number of reasons why your child may repeat the language she hears.

- Your child may simply want to say, "Hi." Imitation can be a way for your child to begin a conversation—a way of saying, "I want to talk to you."
- Repeating the language of others can also be a way for your child to keep in touch with you. While she may want to communicate, your child may not know exactly how to respond to you.
- Because she cannot see what you are talking about, your child may sometimes not understand what your words mean. She may repeat what you say but not yet be able to express her own ideas.
- A sighted child will look at an object over and over again thereby reinforcing the concept of what it is. A blind child will, in a questioning tone of voice, repeat the name of an object again and again to reinforce the concept.
- Your child may practice new and difficult sounds and experiment combining words to make sentences when she imitates you. Sighted children often do this when they are alone in their cribs. They work on sounds that are difficult to pronounce and go over events that took place during the day. In this way children integrate their experiences and master language.

What Can I Do?

As most children grow and learn about language, they repeat the speech of others less often. This is not the case for most blind children. Blind children often spend more time repeating language than using it creatively. Some blind children "get stuck"

on particular phrases or television jingles. This may happen if a child spends too much time listening to television or radio by herself. These activities may be enjoyable for a blind child and give a parent some "time-off." However, they should not take the place of "hands-on" experiences with a variety of different people and objects. Listening to a television or radio does not provide a child with the necessary opportunities to practice talking and listening to others. In addition, television and radio can block out sounds that are important in a blind child's environment. The sounds of a refrigerator door opening, tap water running, and brother and sister playing can help a blind child better understand her environment.

1. Your child's early repetitions need to be encouraged. It is important that you *acknowledge* your child's messages as well as *expand* upon them. We have found that when you imitate and expand upon your child's language, you encourage your child to continue talking. When you use your child's words to build on, it shows that you are REALLY listening and are interested in what she has to say.

"Are you ready for bed?" daddy asks.
"Ready for bed?" Laura says.
"Yeah. It's bedtime. You've had a busy day," says daddy.

2. Try your best to *respond to the ideas and feelings* in your child's repetitions. They are the reasons she learns to talk. By paying careful attention to your child's actions and the events that take place around her, you will often discover what she is trying to say.

"Cindy, it's time to go see Dr. Jacobs," mom says.
"See Dr. Jacobs. See Dr. Jacobs," repeats Cindy.
"You sound a little frightened, Cindy. I'll be with you the whole time and you can sit on my lap," reassures mom.

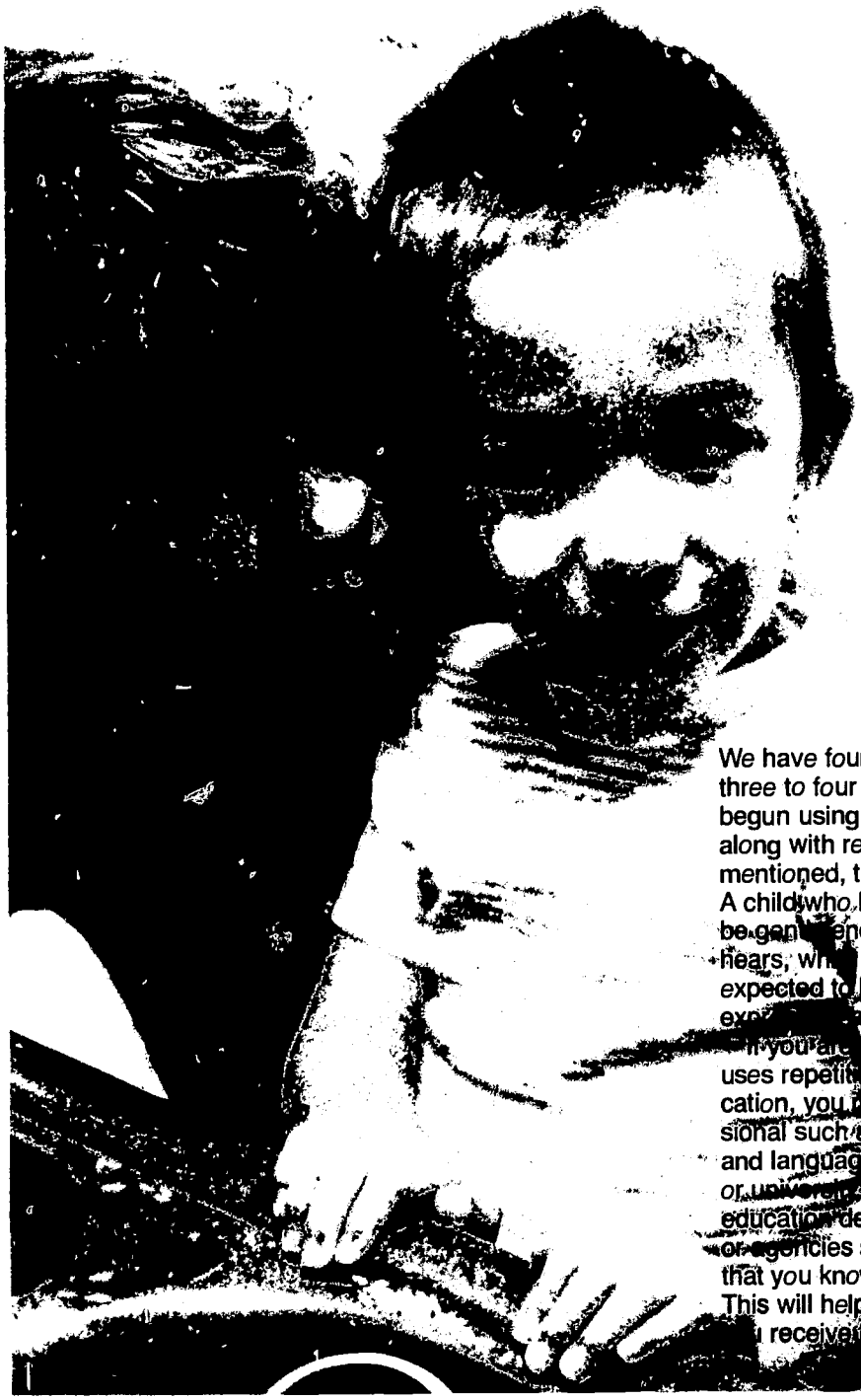
3. Language shared with a blind child needs to be *reinforced with hands-on experiences.* When your child understands you, she may be less likely to mimic your speech.

"This rock feels smooth," mom says while she encourages Carol to explore the surface of a rock.
"Cold," Carol comments.
"It is smooth and cold. We brought this rock back from our camping trip," mom remembers.

4. There are times when you *need to be honest* with your child and let her know when her language is not appropriate. As she gets older, your child may sometimes need to be reminded that *her* message rather than the speech of another person is called for.

"Would you like to come shopping with me or play with daddy?" asks Grandma.
"You like to come shopping?" says Laura.
"I think you mean, 'I'd like to come shopping.' Okay, let's go to the market," says Grandma.

5. It is important to provide your child with a *variety of experiences* that enrich her understanding of the world around her. By interacting with many different people, your child will hear many ways of talking. The experiences she shares with you can be complemented by activities with brothers and sisters, children in the neighborhood, and family friends.



How Much Repetition is Too Much?

We have found that when children are three to four years old, they have usually begun using their own creative language along with repetitions. As we have already mentioned, this is a process that takes time. A child who has no language may need to be gently encouraged to repeat what she hears, while a more verbal child can be expected to begin to use her own words to express ideas.

If you are concerned that your child *only* uses repetition as a means of communication, you might want to consult a professional such as your pediatrician, a speech and language specialist at your local college or university, a teacher in the special education department of your school district, or agencies serving the blind. Keep in mind that you know your child better than anyone. This will help you [illegible] information you receive.

II. WHAT'S THAT?

"What's that noise?" asks Jimmy.
"It's the lawnmower," answers dad.
"What's that noise?" asks Jimmy.
"The gardener down the street.
He's cutting the grass," says dad.
"What's that noise?" asks Jimmy.
"What noise?" asks dad.
"That noise," replies Jimmy.

The father of this blind three-year-old complains of feeling totally drained at the end of a day. He feels as though he cannot say another word. Throughout the day, this father tries to answer his son's questions in order to explain what he cannot see.

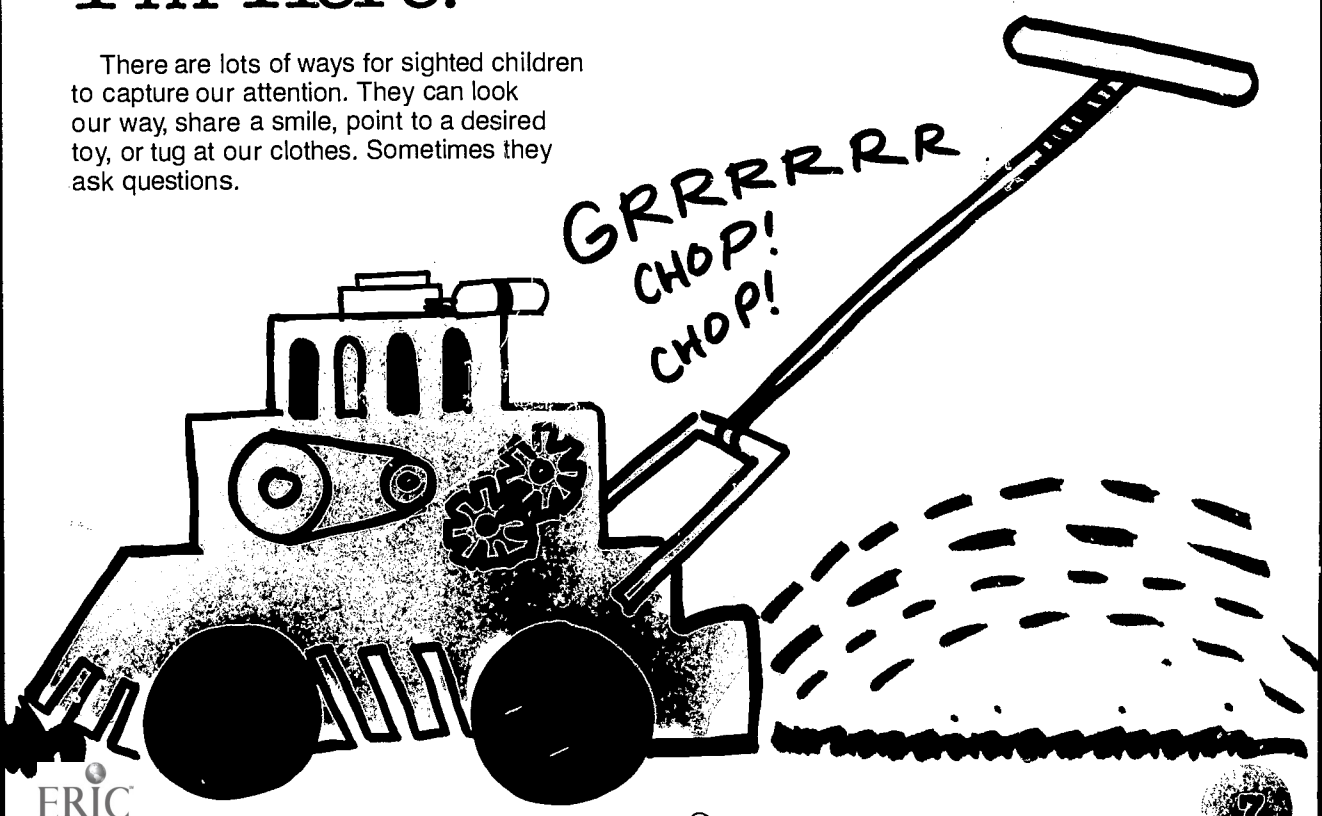
Blind children use questions for many reasons. In this section, we will address some of these reasons. Sometimes, children ask questions in order to attract attention; sometimes, children ask questions because they do not have the language skills necessary to engage in conversation; sometimes, children ask questions because they are constantly being asked questions by adults.

I'm Here!

There are lots of ways for sighted children to capture our attention. They can look our way, share a smile, point to a desired toy, or tug at our clothes. Sometimes they ask questions.

Blind children have fewer ways to attract attention. Some blind children discover that questions get their parents to notice and respond to them. Oftentimes, they are not looking for answers to questions but are really saying to parents, "I'm here. Pay attention to me." You may be able to reduce your child's questions by spending more time talking to him. We don't suggest that you talk non-stop. Give your child a chance to respond. A good rule of thumb is to just talk often enough so he knows you are nearby and are available to him.

There will be times when you may find it difficult to answer your child's questions. If you try to ignore the questions, they won't go away. In fact, your child may ask even more questions. When you feel tired or frustrated, try to set up an activity that your child enjoys and can do on his own or with a brother or sister. If possible, try to arrange for someone else to take care of your child to give you some time to yourself. It is all right to tell your child how you feel when you need some quiet time alone. It is important that shared times be enjoyable for both of you.



Special Time Together

A mother we know used to feel guilty when she spent time doing things which took her attention away from her child. She felt she should be playing with her son all the time he was awake. This is not possible, nor is it necessary. To lessen the guilt, we have found it helps to incorporate a "special time" with your child into your daily routine. This special time (perhaps 20 minutes) can be used in any way which is enjoyable for you and your child. It can be a time to read a story, take a walk, or play a game. This is a time your child will come to look forward to. When you are feeling tired, you can say "Timmy, right now it's my time to read the newspaper. Right after lunch, we will have our special time together."

New Experiences

All children ask questions about things that frighten them. They may ask for an explanation of thunder during a rain storm or a dog barking next door. While we may take these noises for granted, they can be extremely frightening and confusing to young children. Events in the surroundings may be even more bewildering to a child who cannot see.

New experiences prompt many blind children to ask more questions than usual. Listen to your child next time he is in an unfamiliar place or with strangers. Does he ask a lot of questions? Does he seem to be asking for answers or for comfort from the sound of your voice? It is important to reassure your child with a gentle word or soft touch that everything is all right.

When some blind children are in noisy or busy places, they ask many questions. Their questions are a way of asking, "What's going on? What's going to happen next?" Next time you and your child are in a noisy shopping center, it may be helpful to say something like:

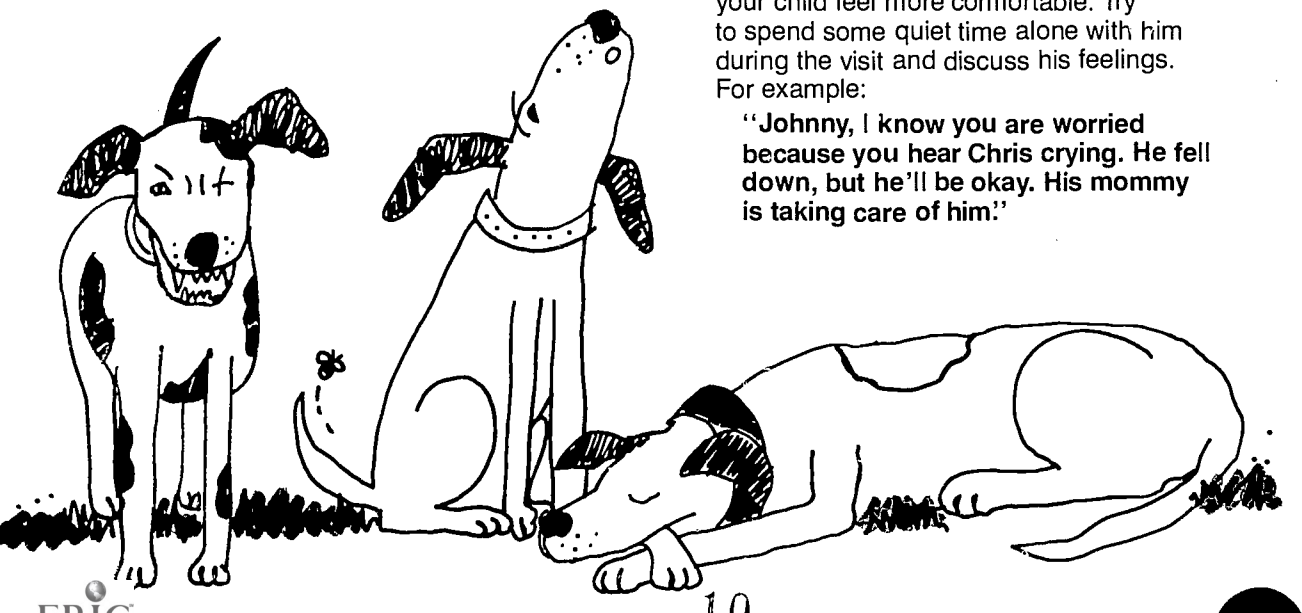
"Kevin, it's awfully noisy in here. We have to go to one more store so that I can buy a belt for daddy. After that, we're going to Aunt Mary's house to see her new puppy."

We have also found it helpful to *describe* new experiences before introducing them to blind children. In this way, you can answer your child's concerns before he asks you a question. For example, a new food can be described and compared with a food which your child already likes.

"For lunch today we're going to have something new. Corn dogs. They're like hot dogs. You eat them on a stick. I think you're going to like them."

It is helpful to prepare your child for visits so he knows what to expect. When you go on a visit, bring along a familiar toy or blanket that offers security to your child. Having something to hold on to may help your child feel more comfortable. Try to spend some quiet time alone with him during the visit and discuss his feelings. For example:

"Johnny, I know you are worried because you hear Chris crying. He fell down, but he'll be okay. His mommy is taking care of him."



How Many Questions Are Too Many?

It is common for all children to ask questions. In fact, most children go through a stage, sometime between two and four years, of endlessly asking questions.

Many blind children "get stuck" in this question-asking stage. However, we can't be certain how to respond to their questions unless we have some idea of what is going on for the child in a particular situation.

What Can I Do?

Your child needs help if he asks too many questions. He may need to learn how to listen to others and how to share ideas.

1. Children's questions often express their feelings. It is helpful to put feelings into words—both your child's feelings and your own. You can offer a model of what to say that is appropriate to the situation. Perhaps you and your child are on the way home from a doctor's visit and your child is asking over and over:

"Where's my band-aid?"
"Does it hurt to get a shot?"
"Are we going home now?"

These kinds of questions might be a way of saying, "I was scared and didn't like going to the doctor." In response, you might say:

"Going to the doctor can be very scary and I know that shots hurt. I don't like getting shots either. It's all over now. Tonight, you can tell daddy about your visit to the doctor."

2. It is important to listen to yourself when you talk to your child. Perhaps you are asking endless questions. Without eye contact and facial expressions, it is difficult to "read" a blind child. We all get caught up in asking too many questions when we are with a blind child because we want the reassurance that our child is listening. Rather than saying,

"Jennifer, do you want alphabet soup?"

you might say,

"Jennifer, today we're going to have alphabet soup for lunch.
I bought your favorite crackers to go with it."

3. There will be times when you need to be direct and tell your child that he has asked enough questions. On these occasions you may need to say something like:

"Joshua, I know you want to be part of our conversation and that's why you're asking so many questions. But now it's time to listen to Mark. When he's finished, it will be your turn to talk."

"Off-The-Wall" Questions

"Sorry I'm late but I had a flat tire this morning," says Aunt Mary.
"Where's Big Bird?" asks five-year-old Joey.
"Oh, have you been watching Sesame Street this morning?" replies Aunt Mary. "Anyway, as I was saying, I had a flat and didn't have my automobile club card with me."
"Do you like french fries?" asks Joey.
"Huh? Oh, yes. I love french fries," answers Aunt Mary.

The kinds of questions Joey asked were "off-the-wall." They had nothing to do with what Aunt Mary was talking about.

A seven-year-old who we know questions everyone he meets about their cars. Alan begins conversations with, "Hi, what kind of car do you have?" and continues to ask, "Do you have automatic windows?" and "What size engine does your car have?" Alan found a set of questions that helps him talk to people. When he is at a loss for words, Alan asks questions—always the same questions. Because of the kinds of questions he asks, Alan does not learn very much about other people—their likes and dislikes, their feelings, and ideas are never explored. People are not able to learn much about Alan either. He does not talk about his hobbies, the tapes he likes, or his favorite subject in school.

There is a fine line between appropriate and inappropriate questions, like those asked by Joey and Alan. If you feel that something is wrong—that your child asks too many irrelevant questions—pay attention to that feeling. It may be time to consult a professional. If your child is four or five years old and is unable to participate in conversations, he may need some extra help.

It will take your child time to learn to listen and respond to others and ask fewer irrelevant questions. You will need to be patient as he learns to use questions in a meaningful way and take part in conversations.

Meaningful questions help children make discoveries about their environment. It is appropriate for children to ask questions about things they do not fully understand. By responding to these questions, parents help their children understand the events that take place around them as well as the feelings and viewpoints of others.

What Can I Do?

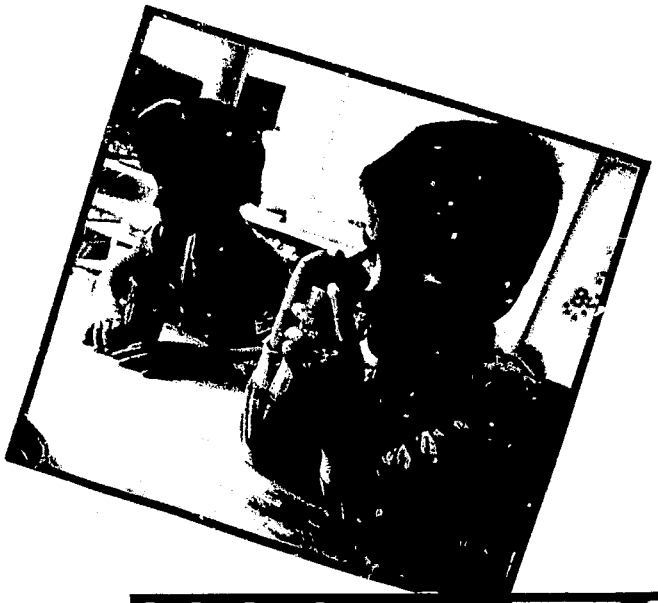
Children like Joey and Alan need help to learn to ask the "right" kinds of questions—questions that are related to the conversations and interests of other people. The following suggestions offer some ways to deal with a child's irrelevant questions.

1. When your child abruptly changes the topic of conversation, you will sometimes need to redirect his interest. Consider the conversation with Joey and Aunt Mary. We would recommend giving Joey the appropriate words to respond to Aunt Mary. For example:

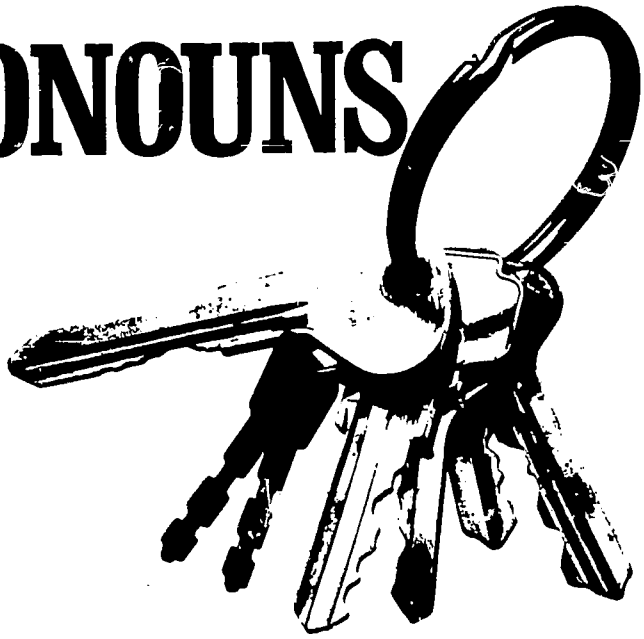
   "Joey, Aunt Mary is talking about her flat tire. I know you want to talk to her too. You could say, 'How did you get your tire fixed?'"

2. A child like Alan needs to learn the kinds of questions that are appropriate to ask strangers. He needs to learn to begin conversations with questions like, "Hi, how are you?" or "What are you doing today?" These kinds of questions can help a child get to know others.

3. Your child should be expected to respect the rights of others. Mealtimes provide excellent opportunities for a child to share the interests and ideas of others. It is important that families do not focus solely on the interests and needs of the handicapped child.



III. PRONOUNS



It's common for a blind child to say:

"*Debbie* wants to listen to music."
"*She* doesn't want to go to bed."
"*You* want a drink of water."

...when the child really means to say *I*.

Many children make mistakes using pronouns. Unlike the names of people, the meanings of pronouns depend on many different things—on who is talking, who is being talked to, and what is being talked about. While pronouns may seem complicated, most children learn how to use them correctly by their third birthday. Some blind children take longer to learn pronouns. It often takes an extra year or two for a blind child to learn how to use pronouns correctly, especially *I, you, he* and *she*.

One reason blind children may find it difficult to learn pronouns is because they cannot see what is talked about. Most children rely on what they see in order to understand what they hear. For example, when a sighted child hears her father ask, "Can *you* bring *me that?*" she sees her father first look to her and then at his running shoe lying on the floor. Even before she understands each word in her father's request, this child will probably understand the meaning of his request and will successfully carry it out.

Another reason why blind children may have difficulty learning to use pronouns correctly is because of the way in which other people talk to them. Some people talk *about* rather than *to* blind children. These children often hear:

"Would *she* like a tuna fish sandwich for lunch?"
"Can *she* do it by *herself?*"

When a child is having trouble with pronouns, some parents avoid using them altogether and instead use the child's first name. For example, some parents ask their child, "Does *Cindy* want to go outside?" Early on, it is natural for parents to sometimes talk like this to children. Parents may do this in order to avoid confusing their child. We encourage parents to follow up with the correct pronouns. For example:

"Give mommy the keys."
"Give *me* the keys."
"Good Cindy, *you* gave *me* the keys."

It is important to keep in mind that all children make mistakes as they learn to talk. They learn to use language appropriately by hearing language used correctly and learning from their mistakes.

We encourage you to use the appropriate pronouns when you talk to your child. We also encourage you to sometimes begin sentences with your child's first name so that she knows she's being spoken to. For example, rather than always saying, "Does Nancy want to go outside?" you might instead ask, "Nancy, do you want to go outside?" You can accompany this question with a gentle stroke to the cheek or a pat on her shoulder to let her know that she is being spoken to.

Blind children who often imitate other people's speech have difficulty using pronouns correctly. A child who imitates the language she hears may need to be encouraged to express her ideas and feelings in her own words. For example, perhaps Karen withdraws when another child takes away her toy. You might try to explain how she is feeling and give her the words to express those feelings.

"I see you're really angry, Karen, because Eric took your toy. You can say to Eric, 'Eric, I don't like it. I want my toy. It's mine.'"

What Can I Do?

When your child is learning to talk it is important that you respond to her ideas. *What* she is trying to say is more important than *how* she says it. If your child says, "She's tired," at the end of a hectic day, you can respond with:

"Yes, we did have a busy day. I'm tired too."

Early on, it is not necessary for you to correct her speech. In fact, even if you try to teach her how to use pronouns correctly, you will not succeed. Until children are ready to learn, corrections do not work. Talk with her about the interests you share. Enjoy talking with your child.

Make It Fun

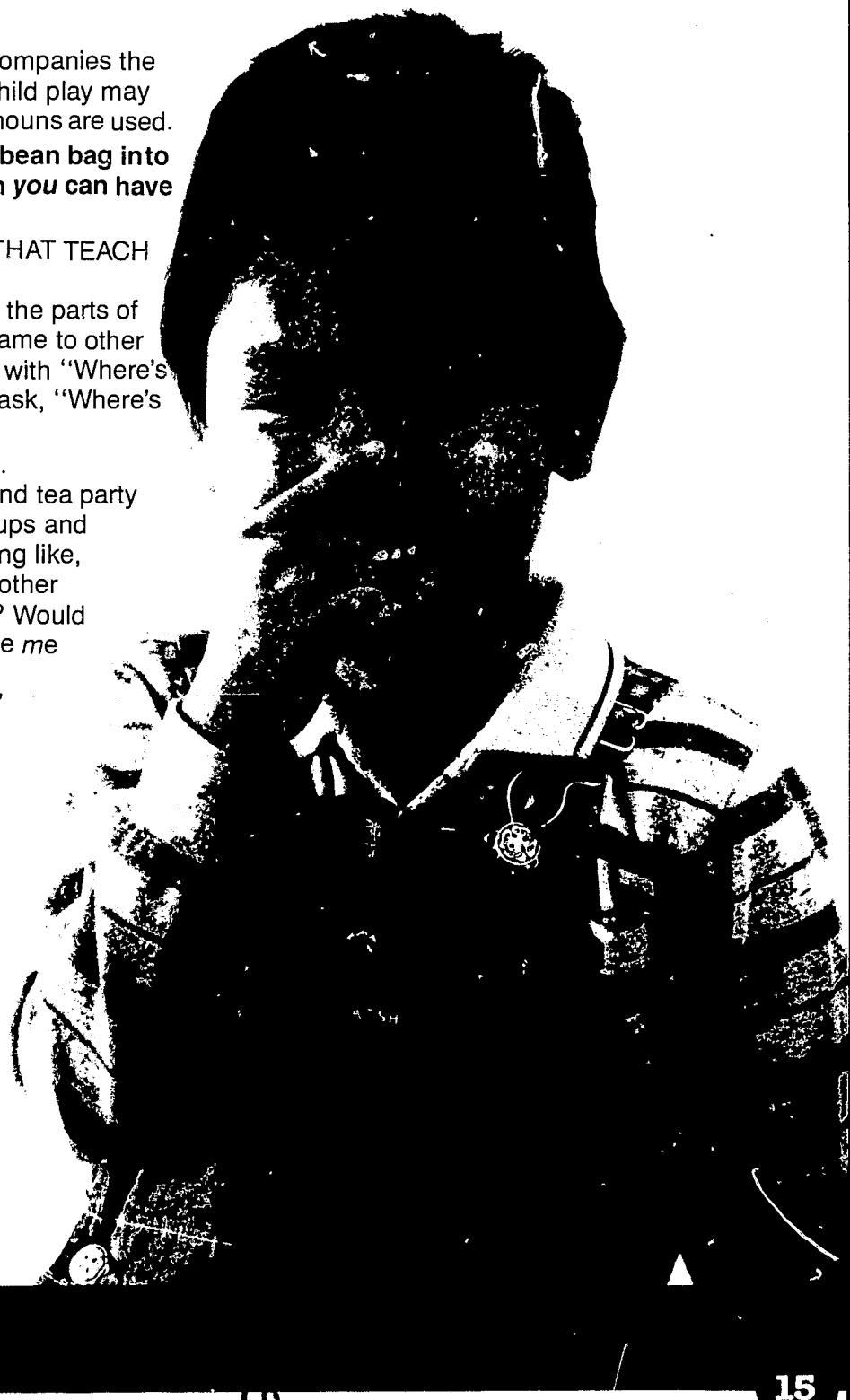
The activities suggested below may help your child to learn about pronouns.

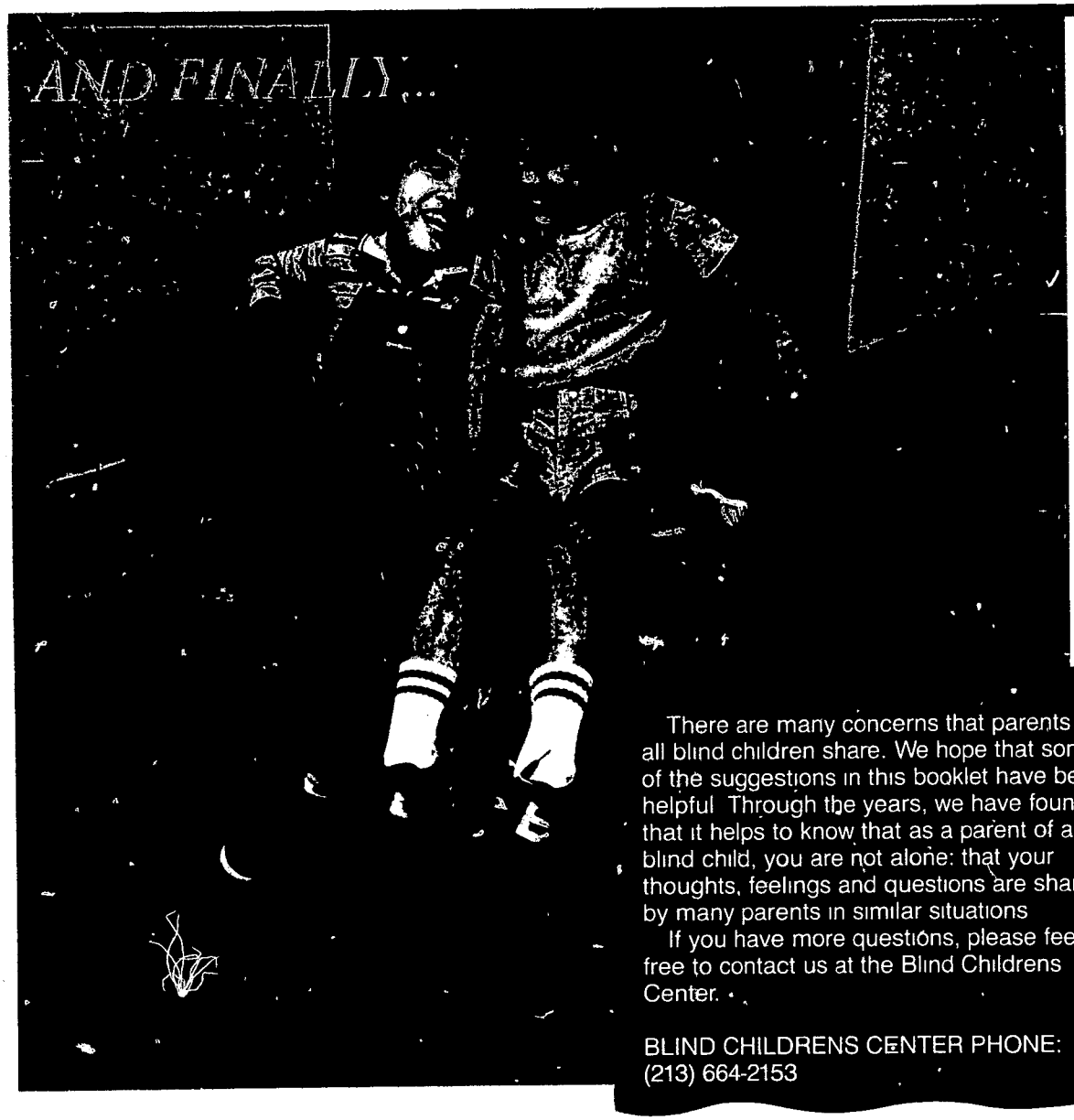
1. TAKING TURNS...
The language that accompanies the games you and your child play may help her learn how pronouns are used.

"First, *I'll* drop the bean bag into the basket and then *you* can have your turn."

2. PLAYING GAMES THAT TEACH BODY PARTS...
Once your child learns the parts of her body, extend the game to other people. You can begin with "Where's *your* nose?" and later ask, "Where's my hair?"

3. PLAYING HOUSE...
You can set up a pretend tea party using plastic dishes, cups and real food. Say something like, "Can *I* please have another piece of apple, Emma? Would *you* like some tea? Give *me* your cup and *I'll* pour you some pretend tea."





There are many concerns that parents of all blind children share. We hope that some of the suggestions in this booklet have been helpful. Through the years, we have found that it helps to know that as a parent of a blind child, you are not alone: that your thoughts, feelings and questions are shared by many parents in similar situations.

If you have more questions, please feel free to contact us at the Blind Childrens Center.

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